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Kisses From Death

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He used to kiss me before he screamed. Teeth would sink into my bottom lip, hard enough to draw blood. I thought of him as a cottonmouth snake, pouring venom from his fangs and into my bloodstream. The first time he slithered onto me I stared at the ceiling fan, counting how many times it could go around before it was over.

Boone was a master manipulator. Glass bottles broke against my skull, red dripped on the floor, but it was I who was at fault. I had misstepped, miscalculated my words.

“Think before you speak,” he’d whisper through tears, hand around my throat. I grinned with blue lips.

I used to come home with bruises beneath my jacket and blood on my mouth. Mama always thought I was wearing too much lipstick. I smiled at her, walked to my room. I peeled off my clothes, sticky with sweat, then examined my swollenness. *Stupid whore*, he echoed in my head, *I know you’ve been sleeping around on me. You think I can’t tell?* Always so paranoid. I can still feel fingers in my thighs, knuckles in my stomach.

I started to get migraines from all the crying I did. I layed on the shower floor most nights to sleep, the water boiling hot. The fog rose from me. It was very hard to breathe; I can’t say I never hoped to suffocate.

The weekend my parents went out of town he convinced me to stay with him. I told them I would be at my friends house. They questioned no further; I was very obedient. He picked me up late Friday night in his rusty blue truck. He honked the horn at me, and I ran down the stairs, overnight bag clutched in my hands. I stopped in the kitchen before I reached the front door.

Mama kept a handgun on top of the fridge in case of emergency. I stood on my tiptoes to reach it. It was heavy, solid black, and cold. My brain raced a million miles per hour; I hadn’t shot a gun since I was little and Daddy took me deer hunting. I cried all night long after watching the graceful creature crumple to the ground. He never let me shoot one again.

The horn honked. Panicked, I stuffed the gun down into my overnight bag and ran out to the driveway. Boone’s headlights were on bright, blinding me.

“What took you so long?” He asked, scowl already dripping down his chin.

“Yeah, sorry, I was just grabbing my toothbrush.”

His eyes narrowed at me, but accepted my response, “Get in.”

His truck smelled like vape juice, the warhead kind, mixed in with cloudy cologne. I didn't talk much to him the whole ride, he just kissed me on the lips and drove towards his house. Every bump we hit my heart stopped, worried about the loaded gun jiggling in my bag. I started to daydream about it going off. Is the barrel pointed at me? Pointed at him? If it went off, would it kill him? The truck would crash. It may even kill me. No one would know what he did to me. They'd wonder what I'd brought the gun for.

We pulled up at his house. It was very old and run down: holes in the floor and no heat. A shiver melted my bones upon entering.

“You alright?” He asks. I nodded to him, smiled. It's always best not to let your predator sniff your fear.

He led me to the couch. I could see the fleas furrowing in the cushions, searching for warmth. I sat down. He jogged to the rusty fridge, pulling out a bottle of Jack whiskey. I bit back at the bile surfacing on my taste buds as he spun off the top, swallowing poison. I won't start crying this early; it'll piss him off before I have the time to think.

I remember Daddy drenching me with doe piss before we climbed into the stand, “It'll trick tha' bucks,” he'd said, “they'll come to us thinkin' they found their lady, but really they're just bringin' us supper.” He grinned after saying so, chew stuck in his bottom teeth.

I thought to myself, *my perfume is doe piss tonight*. Boone put the bottle down.

“Woo!” he shook his head to rid his tongue of bitterness.

I watched him closely, the way he held his head, the redness in his blue eyes. I hated him, and I'm not one to hate. God says we need to love everybody; forgive and forget. I told myself that, right then, but my head throbbed at me, the black bruise resting on my back pained me, and I couldn't listen to voices. I was a slave to pain.

He turned his back for a moment, mixing up a glass of Jack and coke. I leaned, hand quietly shoved in my bag. I gripped it, either the handle or the barrel, I didn't take the time to look before I shoved it beneath the cushion. Fleas gnawed my fingertips. I let them.

"What're you being so quiet for?" He asked. He spun around to face me, walking forwards while sipping on his glass.

"Just nervous. Don't want Mama and Daddy findin' out." I smiled at him.

His arms were around me, setting his glass on the floor beneath our feet. His breath was hot, alcohol stinging my eyelashes. He kissed me, deep and warm. Cold stung my spine as his hands roamed beneath my shirt. Goosebumps form around my stomach; he slid the shirt over my head, my pants, my underwear. His fire lips trickle down my skin, across my neck, my chest.

"What are these?"

I glanced down, "What is it?"

Rage surfaced onto his face, "Who the fuck have you been with now?"

He stood, hands running through his hair.

My breasts were bruised black, an aftermath of angry drunken sex nights before. My heart began to thump harder, faster.

"Baby, it was just you. The other night, remember? You got too rough..." He was already shaking his head.

Boone cocked his brow at me, eyes crazed, "Don't fuckin' lie to me, girl."

"I'm no-"

His hands were around my throat, squeezing. My head bobbed, my tongue swelled, and my fingertips found a solid handle.

I raised it in a flash, and pointed it at my skull. He let go immediately, staring at me like a deer in headlights. I couldn't help but grin. The doe piss lured him in.

"Josie...put the gun down." his face was as sober as I'd ever seen it. I shook my head, finger bouncing gently against the trigger.

“I could kill myself. Right now, outta nowhere.” There were tears washing my dirty cheeks, “They’d blame you. See my beat up skin, and they’d blame it on you.” laughter bubbled in my throat. I swallowed.

“Why are you being fuckin’ crazy?” He took a slow step back from me.

“I’m bein’ crazy?” I raise my eyebrows, “You’ve done *nothing* but beat on me and yell at me, make me feel dirty!” I stand up. He’s not much taller than I am, so I looked him in the eye, gun pressing hard enough into my temple to turn the pale skin red.

“If you’d stopped running around on me I wouldnta’ had to say shit!” He growled. He breathed deep, then reached out to snatch the gun from me. I jerked away.

“Nuh-uh. No,no,no,no,no. This is all I’ve got, Boone. I got control of whether I live or die, and I got your future in my hands.” His eyes moved fast in those moments, darting from the gun to my eyes, to my steady hand. “You’ve nearly killed me before. What’s different now? You just want to be the one to do it? You’re sick Boone, you are sick in the head-”

“I ain’t never meant to hurt you!” Spit flung into my eyes as he spoke. “I can’t control myself sometimes, baby.” His eyes began to cloud. “I don’t wanna hurt you. So much shit has happened to me, I just don’t know how to trust you. I can’t trust nobody.”

He fell to his knees, sobbing. I could taste the fury in my mouth. I heard it all before, the bad mama, abusive daddy, no money, no food, no love.

“I don’t care!” I screamed. “I don’t give a *shit* about your hard life. This is right now. You’re grown! You ain’t a scared little kid anymore, you don’t get to be! *I* am a kid. I’m sixteen, Boone. I can’t be perfect for you, I don’t know how!”

I was crying too, hysterical. My tears were so hot I wondered if maybe the gun had gone off by now and I was just crying blood. Boone stayed on the floor, still sobbing, head sagging between his shoulders. My tears froze with my breath. Slowly, I removed the gun from my temple and shakily pointed it at the top of his head. He looked up, eyes staring down into the barrel. He leaned into it.

“Do it.” His voice was gruff, rumbling in his neck, “Go on, I’m grown. I ain’t been fair.”

He didn't look like that buck I watched fall in the woods. He wasn't graceful. Peaceful. There was a nothingness buried so deep in his eyes I could hardly stand to stare. My hands shook. I hated him, I did. But I loved him, too.

"Why..." I pressed the barrel into his forehead. "I would have done anything for you. I've lied for you, stolen for you, given my body to you. I didn't want to do any of it, but I let it. I let it all happen because I fuckin' love you. And you never gave two shits about me." My emotions were riveting. Up, down, backwards. I couldn't tell if what was exploding in my chest was guilt or satisfaction.

"I do love you..." he whispers.

I bite my tongue to prevent myself from pulling the trigger. "You don't. You are obsessed. You want me to be perfect. Say the right things, wear the right things, do the right things. But only the right things according to you. That's why you like 'em younger, itn't it? You like to be able to beat them into nothing before they're older and know what's happening."

He doesn't say anything but he stands to his feet. My heart began to thump. His eyes were sucking away my strength, his hands were on the end of my gun. He pulled it away and it went off, sending a stray bullet into the heart of the flea infested couch behind me. I watched them squeal and scurry. Another bang shook the old floor.

"Boone!" I couldn't hear how loud the scream was, just felt it in my throat. The ringing in my ears was too loud. He'd shot himself in the mouth.

I sit here, next to a battered body. I've sat here long enough for the blood and brains to dry on the plaster of the walls; for the red to seep so deeply into the wood beneath his skull that the planks have grown sticky, all the way to the core. He looks just as empty as he did when he was breathing. I'm not sure how long it'll take for someone to turn up, or if they will, but I'm not leaving. I'm not running anymore. Here I am and here I'll stay; no one can take anything from me. I took it all from myself before they could get their hands on it.

I lean into him slowly, breathing in the metallic smell radiating from him. I kiss his lips, and the cold in them raises goosebumps on my cheeks. I scream; for the first time it wasn't because of him, because of the spiteful words and anger. It was *for* him.